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African American Women's Experiences as Teen Mothers and their Persistence in Higher Education

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Abstract: Oral narratives exploring the African American mother-daughter communicative relationship about teen pregnancy and the effects on one's college degree attainment. Findings the lack of communication is due to daughters' resistance.

Keywords: teen pregnancy, communication, perseverance

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the components of communication between African American teen girls and their mothers about teen sexual behavior and the consequence of teen pregnancy as a major complication for girls pursuing educational goals. The research questions for this study are as follows: What is the experience of women of who gave birth in their teen years? What is the mother-daughter communicative relationship about teen sexual behavior and the effect it will have on one's educational attainment? How did the experience of being a pregnant teen affect your educational goals? What was the communication about sex between you and your mother/guardian?

In particular, the research will pay attention to communication about sexual behavior, the mother's communication process, and the sexual behavior topics addressed within the mother-daughter relationship as discussed in Askelson, Campo, Smith (2012), and Pluhar & Kuriloff (2004). Furthermore, the research study will also pay attention the effects of teen pregnancy on education, specifically, the outcome of achieving or failure to achieve educational goals (Zhan & Pandey, 2004).

Literature Review

The literature review is compiled of communication research from the various areas: different aspects of mother-daughter communication; the communication process; style of the communication process; minority mothers and daughter's communication. Moreover, the literature explores the avenue of parental, specifically with mothers, communication as an essential factor for adolescent sex education (Pluhar & Kuriloff, 2004). Parental communication is the most essential component of predicting sex behaviors of teenagers (Jaccard, Dittus & Gordon, 2000).

The second thread of the research question that the literature review addresses is the educational attainment of teen mothers. Many teen mothers pursue college degrees to provide family income and become economically stable. While pursuing educational goals, teen mothers may work in minimum or low wage jobs or receive public assistance for family income. Research speaks to the complexities of public assistance and low paying jobs as teens pursue a college degree. (Covington & Spriggs, 2005).

Firstly the literature addresses communication. The process of communication has been developed into a theory that focuses on the goal-orientated communication of the participants in the conversation and not the act of communication alone. It is imperative that both parties are communicating with the same design system of understanding (Goldreich, Juba & Sudan, 2009, p.1). The communication between teens and parents is essential to the decision-making process

of adolescent children about sexual behavior.

Next, the research speaks to the style of the communication process that parents use. Askelson, Campo & Smith (2012), discusses the parenting style as a critical influence on parent-child communication about sexual health topics. The following parenting styles were addressed: authoritative parenting is characterized by parents who are both demanding and responsive to their children; authoritarian parents lack responsiveness to their children, but are demanding of them; permissive parents are more responsive to their children and do not place many demands on them & neglectful parents neither demand from their children nor respond to them.

Conversely, there are parents who are not as comfortable with discussing sexual topics with their adolescents and therefore may delay communication, fail to communicate, or communicate ineffectively (Jaccard, Dittus & Gordon, 2000). According to parents, there are four stated barriers to communication: children are too young to receive information; parents do not know what to say; parents have a lack of knowledge and parents have not taken the time to talk to children (Jaccard, Dittus & Gordon, 2000, p. 189).

Lastly, the researched speaks to higher educational attainment of teen mothers. According to Harris & Allgood (2009) 60% of teen mothers who drop out of high school before turning eighteen and those who do not complete a high school diploma or obtain a GED by the age of twenty are likely to live with their children in poverty due to the lack of higher education. Education is an essential component to economic stability in the family (Zhan & Pandey, 2004).

Teen pregnancy has contributed to the majority of household headed by single mothers. Efforts to obtain an education to support their families many African American single mothers balance parenting and college. It was also noted that 40% of these single mothers work full-time and more than 50% of them spend 30 hours per week of their time care giving. Despite these obligations many African American single mothers are able to graduate and continue on to advanced degrees (Lashley & Ollivierre, p. 140, 2014).

Purpose of the Study

In 1995 adolescent pregnancy rates were 83.6 per 1000 in the U.S. compared with 47.0 in England and Wales, 45.4 in Canada, 20.2 in France, and 24.9 in Sweden (Kohler, Manhart & Laffery, 2008, p. 344). Teen pregnancy is higher among African American and Hispanic teens. By examining the experience of African American teen mothers through a qualitative study, we allow the participants to be empowered as co-researchers who are constructing a rich data resource of exploring mother-daughter communication about sexual behavior its effect on the teen mother's access to a college education to obtain economic stability. This information will be a resource for teen abstinence programs to understand the teen perspective of sexual activities and consequences and the long term effects on higher educational goals.

Research Questions

What is the experience of women of who gave birth in their teen years? How did the experience of being a pregnant teen affect your higher educational goals? What was the communication about sex between you and your mother/guardian?

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework will consist of communication, and educational theories. First, the communicative relationship between the mother and daughter and its goal to strengthen relationships and communication (Goldreich, Juba & Sudan, 2009) and the level of

communication processes that are successful for parents when communicating and educating about sexual topics (Pluhar & Kuriloff, 2004). The educational theory explains the importance of family and external support systems for African American single mothers who are persevering to complete a college degree.

Methodology

The interpretive paradigm for this study is social constructivism (Creswell, 2013) to better understand the participants' subjective experience of being a teen mother. The social constructivist view will be utilized as the theoretical lens to the teen mothers' pregnancy experiences and then advancing into their successful academic career. The meaning is individualized with each participant as every experience is unique. For example, the context of the participants' communicative relationship and educational values are factors that will vary with each participant's experience. A qualitative oral narrative approach allowed participants to tell their personal experiences through a perspective that is developed through their individual identities since each interviewee provided a different truth about the experience of being a pregnant teen. The study is in progress consisted of two African American women over the age of eighteen who experienced teen pregnancy before the age of twenty and who successfully completed an undergraduate degree. Each is currently pursuing an advanced degree. A third participant will be added to the study.

Research Setting

The research setting for the pilot study took place on Cleveland State University's campus. Conducting the research on CSU's campus gave me access to participants who met the criteria for the study through classmates and other CSU's students. The participants in the study included women, who have experienced being a pregnant teen before the age of twenty. The participants were women over eighteen, from an African American background, and who are pursuing or completed an undergraduate degree. To solicit volunteers, fliers were distributed to students during authorized (approval from department dean) class presentations to explain the study and request volunteers. A convenient selection (Creswell, 2013), of two women were contacted for an interview. The participants were the most convenient and accessible women who fit the study's criteria. One participant is my classmate and the second was a referral from a CSU student who referred her classmate. The women were contacted to arrange the time and place of the interview and they were instructed how the study will be utilized and the time commitment (Galletta, 2013).

Data Collection Process

The development of the interview questions were semi-structure open-ended questions that connected to the research question while guiding the interview into a purposeful direction (Galletta, 2013). The structure of the questions for this proposed study guided participants to narrate their experience of teen pregnancy as an oral account of pivotal moments in their life before the pregnancy, during, and to motherhood. The interview questions asked during two one hour one-on-one audio taped interviews. Orthographic, verbatim, transcription was utilized to capture spoken and unspoken communication in addition to utterances to provide meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Data Analysis

Analyzing the data began with transcribing the two one-hour interviews and scanning all the transcribed responses given by the participants. The short to the point answers contained important feedback, as well as, the more lengthy paragraphs. I began coding with general terms of what I thought I saw in the responses; however, after completing the first transcript and then beginning the second I began to reevaluate it from a different perspective. The second interview had many similarities that help to bring into focus some of the codes from the first interview. I reviewed the first interview and change many of the codes. I shorten the code name to make them more precise. (Galletta, 2013: Saldana, 2013).

Findings

There were six themes that emerged from the study: **Estranged communication** which occurs between the teen girl and her mother leads to lack of pertinent sex education information. Following the lack of sex education information, the teen became pregnant; the **“White space”** theme transitions the teen girls into teen mothers. Therefore, **Teen parenting** begins the journey of preserving in higher education to benefit the financial future of the family. However, the theme that the participants referred to often and revered was **Parental support** system which was essential to academic success. A closely related theme of parental support came in the form of external support from individuals who assisted with the care of the children who were seen as **“Campus babies”**. The last theme of perseverance where **“Quitting was not an option”** reveals the source of their dedication to higher education.

Estranged communication. The participants’ mothers attempted to have a communicative relationship with their daughters; however, the participants admittedly refrained from talking to their mothers about sexual topics stating that they received the information from other sources of confidantes as indicated below:

“White space”, as one participant explained, was the holding place or zone as the news of a positive pregnancy became a reality and the other participant’s world was crushed.

Teen parenting as continuing college students the teen mothers had to coordinate school, work, and personal schedules. They illustrate how they managed the various areas of their life in the example below

Parental support the teen mothers had parents who assisted with childcare during critical times of exams and other study period, transportation to and from the teen mothers’ home to the parents’ home and emotional support.

“Campus babies” The saying that it takes a village to raise a child is a reality that teen mothers on a college campus must have because the teen mothers’ parents are not present nor are other family members. All college students from family units on campus it’s a natural formation that occurs and is especially essential to care for an infant.

“Quitting was not an option” to meet their educational goals the teen mothers had to maintain a focus and a spirit of perseverance. It took many years to obtain the goals; however, quitting was never an option.

Discussion

Two participants who are students of CSU pursuing advanced degrees were interviewed based on their meeting the criteria of the study. Two African American women who became pregnant in their teen years shared their experience of being pregnant, the communicative relationship with their mothers and the effect of the pregnancy on their educational goals. The interview questions explored the communication between the mothers and daughters and which the goal is to strengthen the relationship and communication process between the two individuals (Goldreich, Juba & Sudan, 2009). The participants expressed the lack of communication with their mothers on sex education topics primarily citing the daughter unwillingness to talk about the subjects with the mother. The participants received advice from friends or school programs.

Next, according to (Gillmore, Archibald, Morrison, Wildsdon, Wells, Hoppe, Nahome & Murowchick, 2002) teens engagement in sexual activity is a normal development and the teens are not weighing in the consequences of the action. The participants stated that they were informed of the consequences and disregarded the information during the decision-making process stating reasons such as “I didn’t think... it was between me and my best friend we didn’t want to go to high school “Virgins”.

Finally the importance of family support in the success of the participants completing their undergraduate studies and subsequently obtaining advanced graduate degrees. Their commitment to their educational goals was consistent especially during the challenges of teen parenthood.

This study may be utilized in middle school curriculum in health or consumer & family science courses. To develop critical thinking skills about life choices and consequences for both male and females in conjunction with sex education materials. The findings of this study may supplement topics such as body development and reproduction taught to middle school students to the life consequences of teen sexual activity.

Limitations

One limitation of the study is the number of participants. The IRB proposal stated that three participants would be utilized. Only two participants were available. I conducted a search for a third participant. Recently a third participant was indentified, and I am currently conducting the face-to-face interview and transcribing the data. The results of the third participant are not available at this time.

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